

When studying schooling is not enough: Incorporating employment in models of educational transitions

Josipa Roksa^{a,*}, Melissa Velez^{b,*}

^a Department of Sociology, University of Virginia, 555 New Cabell Hall, P.O. Box 400766, Charlottesville, VA 22904, United States

^b Department of Sociology, New York University, 295 Lafayette St., 4th Floor, New York, NY 10012, United States

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Abstract

Several recent studies have demonstrated the importance of incorporating qualitative differentiation within educational systems in the study of class inequality in student transitions. We extend these endeavors by broadening the definition of differentiation to include participation in the labor market. As increasing proportions of students continue their educational journeys beyond compulsory schooling, they are considering not only whether to stay in school but also whether to *simultaneously* enter the world of work. Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth of 1997 (NLSY97), we show that family background influences not only whether students make specific educational transitions but also whether they combine those educational transitions with work. Student trajectories are also path dependent, with employment during one educational transition being related to specific transition patterns at a later point in time. Considering how students combine school and work reveals another dimension of differentiation which can be exploited by socioeconomically advantaged families to “effectively maintain” inequality in educational outcomes. © 2009 International Sociological Association Research Committee 28 on Social Stratification and Mobility. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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The study of social class inequality in educational transitions has flourished since Mare's (1980, 1981) research demonstrated the advantages of conceptualizing educational attainment as a series of sequential transitions through the educational system. According to the Mare model, students decide between two options at each transition point: whether to continue to the next grade or level in their schooling or to leave the educational system. However, the educational transition process is rarely that simple, as students often need to choose between more nuanced alternatives, such as different tracks and institutional types. Indeed, several

recent studies have shown that qualitative differentiation within educational systems shapes student choices and class inequality in educational transitions (e.g., Ayalon & Shavit, 2004; Ayalon & Yogev, 2005; Breen & Jonsson, 2000; Lucas, 2001).

We extend these endeavors by considering another dimension of differentiation: participation in the labor market. As much as students decide whether to pursue academic or vocational tracks, or whether to enter higher education through 2-year or 4-year institutions, they also make decisions about whether and how to combine schooling with work. In the U.S., the majority of high school and college students are employed while pursuing their studies. Consequently, differentiation occurs not only within the structure of the educational system, but also in the distinct ways in which students participate in the worlds of school and work. Specific patterns

* Corresponding authors.

E-mail addresses: jroksa@virginia.edu (J. Roksa), mjv236@nyu.edu (M. Velez).

of engagement with school and work present qualitatively different pathways which are likely to have distinct relationships to social class.

Results from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth of 1997 (NLSY97) indicate that family background influences not only students' decision to make specific educational transitions but also whether they combine those educational transitions with work. Advantaged family background increases the likelihood of making each of the educational transitions examined, while at the same time shielding students from intense engagement in the labor market. Consistent with effectively maintained inequality (Lucas, 2001), students from more advantaged families are more likely to advance through the educational system as well as follow more advantaged pathways, i.e., pathways including limited participation in the labor market. Moreover, just as students' academic trajectories are path dependent (e.g., see Breen & Jonsson, 2000; Lucas, 2001), so is their engagement in the labor market: employment during one educational transition is related to specific transition patterns at a later point in time. These results illuminate the importance of including labor market participation in educational transition models as another dimension of differentiation. Qualitative differences both within and outside of the educational system can be exploited by socioeconomically advantaged families in order to "effectively maintain" inequality in educational outcomes.

1. Literature review

1.1. Making educational transitions

Mare (1980, 1981) conceptualized educational attainment as a series of school continuation decisions. At each transition point in the educational system, students have the option of continuing to the next level or dropping out. The Mare model presents a distinct theoretical proposition about how students attain a certain level of education: they advance through the educational system "in a sequence of irreversible steps" (Mare, 1993, p. 353). Consequently, educational attainment is not modeled as the total years of school completed but as a series of transitions, each of which is conditional on having completed all previous transitions. The logic of the Mare model has been applied extensively in cross-national comparative research, examining class inequality in transitions through secondary schooling (e.g., Shavit & Blossfeld, 1993) and into higher education (e.g., Shavit, Arum, & Gamoran, 2007).

Several recent studies have extended the Mare model to include qualitative differentiation within educational systems (e.g., Ayalon & Shavit, 2004; Ayalon & Yogeve, 2005; Breen & Jonsson, 2000; Lucas, 2001).¹ Most educational systems exhibit some degree of differentiation, and thus, students need to decide not only whether to continue their schooling but also what path to pursue (e.g., academic vs. vocational). Analyzing transitions through the Swedish educational system, Breen and Jonsson (2000) compared the traditional Mare model to a multinomial transitions model, which distinguishes academic from vocational tracks during early transitions and university from "short-cycle" 2-year programs at the tertiary level. They showed that multinomial models produce stronger class origin effects for early transitions but weaker effects for transition into postsecondary education than the Mare model.

In the U.S. context, Lucas (2001) considered differentiation by track location (college preparatory vs. non-college preparatory) and demonstrated that family background influences the specific type of education students pursue. At a given level of education, the "socioeconomically advantaged seek out whatever qualitative differences there are at that level and use their advantages to secure quantitatively similar but qualitatively better education" (Lucas, 2001, p. 1652). This pattern of results has been termed "effectively maintained inequality" and has since been supported in other contexts. For example, Ayalon and Shavit (2004) showed that recent educational reforms in Israel reduced inequality in attainment of a regular secondary diploma but increased inequality in the odds of obtaining a university-qualifying diploma.²

By considering the differentiated nature of educational systems, these recent studies have provided a more nuanced account of inequality in educational transitions. However, all studies to date define differentiation strictly as occurring within educational systems (e.g., specific tracks or institutional types). We propose that differentiation also occurs in how educational transitions fit within the context of student lives, namely their participation in the labor market. Once students advance into secondary and postsecondary education, many of those continuing their schooling also enter the labor market. Therefore, they need to decide not only whether to stay in school

¹ Some scholars have argued for abandoning the Mare model (e.g., Cameron & Heckman, 1998), although they do not address the key issue that concerns us here. Also, see the response to this critique in Lucas (2001).

² For a similar analysis focusing on the field of study, see Ayalon and Yogeve (2005).

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